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ABSTRACT

This precis focuses on research into the problem of school discipline. The school culture, or the atmosphere and tone of everything that happens in the school, is seen as having a significant influence on student behavior. Several examples of improving the culture of schools are given. Strategies for correcting misconduct are suggested, with particular emphasis on the school principal and the need for strong leadership. (JD)

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Research in Brief

Chester E. Finn, Jr., Assistant Secretary

William J. Bennett, Secretary

Improving Student Discipline

The classroom is the command center where teachers win or lose the battle for academic achievement and order. If disruptive behavior prevails and discipline is weak or lacking, then the chances for victory are slim. Yet opinion polls consistently show that the public considers student discipline a major problem facing the schools.

According to a survey conducted in 1987 by the U.S. Department of Education, 44 percent of teachers said that they saw more disruptive behavior in their schools now than 5 years ago, and 54 percent thought that student misconduct interfered with learning "to a moderate or great extent." Almost one-third of senior high school teachers (32 percent) asserted that students' use of drugs and alcohol adversely affected their performance to the same extent.

In another survey, 96 percent of public secondary school principals reported having suspended students for disciplinary reasons during school year 1983-84. Nationally, 2 million public school students were suspended in the 1985-86 school year.

In light of such findings, the Department of Education recently sponsored a conference to find out how schools and teachers can improve discipline. Participants concluded that educators and parents can restore order to their schools if they are willing to follow certain steps.

Research shows, for example, that instructors can reduce disruptive behavior and increase scholastic success by setting and enforcing clear rules at the beginning of the year, consistently rewarding good behavior, and promptly punishing misconduct. Within this framework, rewards and punishments should be incremental and designed for speedy application. Punishments must deprive students of things they want, rewards must be attractive, and both should be acceptable to the community.

Teachers can also stimulate students' interest by maintaining momentum so that classes do not lag, and by encouraging student participation. Finally, they can set an example of desirable behavior in the classroom by being prepared for class, showing enthusiasm for their subject, and not "clock watching."

School Culture

Maintaining order and discipline is not exclusively a classroom responsibility, however. Research shows that the "school culture"—the atmosphere and tone for everything that happens in the school—has a significant influence on student behavior. Students learn best in an orderly environment where they are required to have high standards and they are treated with respect.

In order to achieve a more positive atmosphere, researchers agree that principals and teachers must present a "united front" on both discipline and achievement matters. They can improve discipline by accurately targeting problem areas and agreeing on how to treat them. They can then develop, with students' contributions, a school disciplinary code that is enforced firmly, fairly, and consistently. The code should be published and distributed so that every student knows the consequences for breaking it and should clearly spell out the punishment for misbehavior. Good conduct should also be rewarded. By taking such steps, principals and teachers can join in building a school culture toward achievement, not chaos.

How and Where It's Working

Many schools have found that even the worst discipline problems can be overcome if principals, teachers, parents, and students actively commit themselves to creating an orderly environment.

Eight years ago, Samuel Gompers Vocational Technical High School, an all-boys school in the South Bronx, New York, was a "war zone." Alcohol and drug use, fistfights in the halls, assaults on teachers, and fires in the classrooms were daily phenomena. Over 300 of its 1,100 students were absent on the average day and most of those "present" were in the hallways. Only 25 percent could read at or above their grade level. By their senior year, twice as many had dropped out as graduated, and many teachers had also left their jobs, leaving more than 40 classes leaderless each day.

Today Gompers High School has been transformed. Well over 5,000 students compete yearly for admission, and the graduating class has more than doubled. In addition, 67 percent of the students are reading at or above their grade level, while the dropout rate has fallen to 6.2 percent and suspensions plummeted to 22 in 1984. By contrast, the school suspended 208 students in 1981.

How did this happen? First, the principal and staff had to regain control of the school. This meant setting a code of conduct, distinguishing between major and minor crimes, and expelling students who left the school premises and returning them to it. It also meant capturing those who set off fire alarms, outlawing gangs, and adopting a dress code prohibiting gang colors.

The principal and staff then improved school culture significantly by making Gompers coed, updating technology, revamping the curriculum, and increasing communication between students and faculty. They also removed ineffective teachers and actively recruited superior instructors who welcomed the challenge of teaching at the battle-scarred school.

Not many schools have problems as bad as this one had, but every school must deal with misconduct at some level.

In Baltimore, Maryland, for example, one junior high school with disciplinary problems successfully improved behavior by providing students with clear, consistent limits, explaining the consequences of misconduct, and providing definite follow-through for good and bad behavior.

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Teachers, parents, and administrators united in an effort to get students committed to changing their behavior. They held classroom meetings to encourage a higher regard for and the school and generate concern for its welfare, and they gave positive incentives for good behavior that included tokens redeemable for food treats, school supplies, admission into a game room, and special events such as parties and trips.

Strategies

In the schools discussed here, and countless others, principals and teachers tackled their problems through a combination of direct and indirect strategies that made a difference. Direct strategies concentrate on correcting misconduct or rewarding good behavior, whereas indirect tactics influence student behavior by improving their learning environment. Thus, these schools confronted their problems directly with authoritative changes in handling cases of misbehavior, while indirectly reducing frustration and alienation by involving students more in school life. Consequently, teachers were able to teach and manage their classrooms more effectively.

The schools achieved these results by developing broadly supported schoolwide goals, and by encouraging increased collegiality, cooperation, and consensus among staff. They improved communication and joint decisionmaking between the principal and teachers, and encouraged student participation. The problem of student motivation was addressed through the introduction of team learning, rewards, and recognition programs.

In addition to these measures, large schools were sometimes broken into smaller units, such as schools-within-schools, since small schools often encourage good behavior. In such settings, students usually know their teachers better, receive more individualized attention, and develop increased self esteem. Of course, teachers in small schools can also identify and deal with disruptive students more easily.

Combining various strategies may gain better results than concentrating on just one or two. And strategies will need to be adapted to local circumstances.

Strong Leadership

While all the strategies outlined here contribute to the creation of less disruptive, more highly motivated students, these schools could not have achieved their goals without strong leadership from their principals. This is a crucial ingredient in improving discipline. Students respond best to a principal they can respect. These men and women are firm, fair, consistent, and highly visible. Though they differ in style and technique, they all value order and discipline, stay in touch with the local police when necessary, and encourage a common agreement on school goals and how to attain them.

Strong principals clearly and consistently articulate high academic standards and other expectations of students and staff. They demand prompt, accurate information about incidents of misbehavior and absenteeism and punish offenders consistently. An outstanding principal monitors classroom activity and student performance, systematically evaluates teachers, and formulates goals that are linked to the mastery of basic skills. Effective principals also avoid unnecessary classroom interruptions, distractions, and burdens. They motivate staff and students to work together toward common goals. And they recruit, retain, and train talented staff members. By working together, principals and teachers can improve instruction—one of the most effective ways to improve discipline.

Conclusion

The best approach to discipline creates an environment that motivates good behavior. Programs that treat the whole school, rather than isolating particular disciplinary problems, are most likely to succeed. Simply banishing misconduct does not ensure a well disciplined student body or an environment conducive to learning. The final goal of discipline, after all, is to foster greater learning as well as greater virtue, stronger character and, in time, self discipline.

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